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SUBJECT: RAFSANJANI VERSUS QALIBAF?

CLASSIFIED BY: Jason L. Davis, Consul General, Dubai, State.  
REASON: 1.4 (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: With 58 days left before the June 17 Iranian Presidential election and 21 days until the start of candidate registration on May 10, there are 19 Iranian men (and no women) cited in Iranian press as possible Presidential candidates. Former President and current Expediency Council Chairman Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who in public statements has skirted ever closer but as yet refrained from announcing his candidacy, is leading in most polls and is considered the favorite. Polls show Former Education Minister Mustafa Moin more popular than the other main reformist candidate, former Majlis Speaker Mehdi Karroubi, although there is a real chance that the Guardian Council will bar Moin from running. Most interestingly, recently resigned Law Enforcement Commander Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf seems to be becoming the favorite conservative candidate, with some analysts saying that he might be a surprise victor come elections. END SUMMARY.

IN THIS CORNER - AKBAR SHAH

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¶2. (U) On April 14, Expediency Council chairman and former President Hashemi Rafsanjani gave his clearest signal to date that he intended to run for President, although stopping short of declaring. At what could have passed at a campaign speech before an audience of Office for Consolidating Unity (Iran's largest student group) members at Tehran's Jamaran Hosseiniyah, he said that "my presence in the elections has become more definite." Repeating his previous contention that he hoped that someone else who had the requisite "personal capacity and public popularity" became President, he said that "I'm still waiting, but the more I proceed, based on polls, my hope in achieving this wish becomes smaller-given that my poll numbers are high, that my presence might perhaps maximize participation, that I might get a high vote and might be able to lessen partisanship ('band bazi'), these are encouraging factors for my presence in the election." He said that he would announce his final decision within two to three weeks (Note: Candidate registration is May 10-14).

¶3. (C) Many political stalwarts are convinced that Hashemi (one of whose nicknames is "Akbar Shah" due to his vast power and possessions) has already made his decision to run, and is merely delaying his announcement for maximum effect. A Rafsanjani-era cabinet minister told Poloff on April 11 that he was "99 percent certain" that Rafsanjani would run and win, and a serving Majlis representative told Poloff on April 18 that he too was sure that Rafsanjani would be Iran's next President.

¶4. (C) Although he has not yet announced, Rafsanjani has already begun to set up his election apparatus. A wealthy Iranian-Azeri industrialist told Poloff on April 16 that Rafsanjani has put his former Minister of Economic and Financial Affairs, Morteza Mohammad Khan as his campaign manager in Tehran, and his former Agriculture Minister Dr. Issa Kalantari for the same position in Azerbaijan.

¶5. (C) Interestingly, this industrialist explained to Poloff

that many ordinary Iranians, especially in villages or outside of the major cities, vote based on guidance from opinion leaders. These opinion leaders are often prominent local clergy or employers. This industrialist said that he himself had approximately 400,000 workers under him, most of whom would vote as he directed. As such, he has been feted by Mohsen Rezai himself, and Mohammad Qalibaf's brother and Tehran Law Enforcement Commander Morteza Talai on behalf of Qalibaf.

However, he told Poloff that he would be supporting Rafsanjani.

A prominent Mashhad industrialist told Poloff on April 18 that he had been asked to rent out some of his prime office space in Mashhad for use as a Rafsanjani campaign headquarters, although being a staunch Rafsanjani opponent, he refused.

¶6. (C) Rafsanjani campaign material is also already in circulation, and it indicates the slogans and strategies of a campaign that seeks to portray him as a strong, capable, above factional politics, and someone who can deliver Iran from its current crises. On April 16, one of Poloff's contacts gave him a 64-page booklet titled, "Passing Through the Crisis and The Start of a New Season - Why We Should Vote For Hashemi." Putatively written by "A Group of Independent Iranian Experts" in Dey month 1383 (20 Dec 2004 - 19 January 2005), this book has 64 sections, each headed with a different reason why Rafsanjani should become President, to include:

- Public need for Moderation and Tranquillity
- Society needs a President above Factions
- A Strong President for Increasing the System's Efficiency
- Worthy Managers are the Iranian Nation's and Islamic Civilization's Capital, and Worthiness must be the Main Standard for Directors Selected by the Future President
- Key Responsibilities must be Entrusted to those having Experience and Liberality
- Exclusive Power is Corrupting; There are Currently Indications of a Dangerous Movement of "Escape from Leadership" (i.e. all three branches shouldn't be controlled by the same faction)
- The World has Changed Rapidly. Internal Affairs Shouldn't Keep us in Ignorance of World Developments.

-Hashemi was the Architect of the Policy of Decreasing Tensions and Building Confidence Internationally, and he can Engineer any Negotiations with Honor and Authority

¶7. (U) Some however contend that Rafsanjani has still not made up his mind. In a April 14 article in the reformist "Sharq" newspaper titled, "the Lonely Statesman," prominent political scientist (and fervid Rafsanjani supporter) Sadeq Zibakalam wrote that despite popular perceptions, Rafsanjani has not yet decided to run. Zibakalam claims that Rafsanjani is still seeking to answer two basic questions, the first being whether he could win. Zibakalam points out that Iran has approximately 48 million eligible voters. If 50 percent participate, Hashemi would need at least 12 of the 24 million votes cast (a percentage significantly higher than his current polling). The second question is that even if he does win, it remains to be seen what he could do in the face of solid opposition from the conservative "Osulgarayan/Abadgarayan" (i.e. the "Principlists" and "Islamic Developers") faction, both within and outside of the Majlis. Zibakalam also points out that many if not most of Rafsanjani's traditional lieutenants, such as Ataollah Mohajerani, Abdollah Nuri, Gholamhossein Karbaschi and (the late) Mohsen Nurbakhsh are no longer with him to advise and assist him should he run.

¶8. (C) A prominent Tehran-based political analyst told Poloff on April 15 that Rafsanjani's brother-in-law and right-hand man Hossein Marashi (currently head of Iran's Tourist Organization) had quite recently told him that Rafsanjani was still unsure. This political scientist, himself a staunch reformist, was scheduled to meet with Hashemi at some point within the week of April 17-24, at which time he told Poloff he would add his own

voice to those urging Rafsanjani to run.

AND IN THIS CORNER - THE NEWCOMER

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¶9. (U) Among the ranks of Iran's conservative Osulgarayan, the traditional conservative faction controlling the conservative coalition "Coordinating Council for the Forces of the Islamic Revolution" (CCFIR), headed by former Majlis speaker Ali Akbar Nateq Nuri, Majlis Deputy Speaker Mohammad Reza Bahonar, and the pro-bazaar "Islamic Coalition Association," are supporting former Director General of the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), Ali Larijani. Among the five conservative candidates who have rejected what they see as the CCFIR's premature annotation of Larijani (Majlis representative Ahmad Tavakoli, former Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati, Tehran Mayor Mahmoud Ahmadi Nejad, resigned Law Enforcement Commander Mohamad Baeqer Qalibaf, and Expediency Council Secretary Mohsen Rezai), conventional wisdom is that Qalibaf and Ahmadi Nejad are the front-runners.

¶10. (C) On April 18, prominent Tehran-based international business consultant "Hassan" made the case to Poloff that recently resigned Law Enforcement Commander Mohammad Baeqer Qalibaf stands a good chance of being Iran's next President. He prefaced his comments by pointing out the potential importance of Iran's youth vote (age 16-25). According to Hassan, this group is potentially 40 percent of the vote. Although many won't vote, many will, to include a large portion of first-time voters (indeed, Hassan said that turnout might well be as high as 60-65 percent). Hassan said he believed these would be the 'swing voters' in the upcoming election, and that the logic of their candidate selection was important, albeit difficult, to understand.

¶11. (C) First, Hassan said that many of those in this age group who do vote will use their vote to "get revenge" against the system, and that a young (43) non-cleric like Qalibaf would be the most likely candidate to glean these young protest votes. These young voters are not likely to vote for Rafsanjani, a 71-year old cleric they see as an establishment figure disliked even more than Khamenei.

¶12. Secondly, since becoming Law Enforcement Forces (LEF) commander in June 2000, Hassan claimed that Qalibaf has transformed it into a much more moderate, professional and public-friendly corps, which no longer hassles Iran's youth in the streets for mingling with members of the opposite sex and related social offences. The head of a major Iranian youth group reiterated this point to Poloff in a April 19 conversation, saying that Qalibaf has been responsible for a sea change in the LEF, with young people no longer fearing LEF presence on the streets. Hassan also pointed out that Qalibaf has vastly simplified procedures having to do with registering for mandatory military service, to the point where it can be done on-line, vice repeatedly queuing at different LEF offices for weeks. Qalibaf's stewardship of the LEF during these years has given him the reputation of a competent, apolitical manager.

¶13. (C) Hassan said that Qalibaf's reputation has also been burnished while serving as head of Supreme Leader Khamenei's anti-smuggling/anti-corruption drive. This drive has made headlines by shutting down an Payam airport in Karaj for smuggling activities and for arresting the Iran Tobacco Organization's Director General and some senior managers for bribery and financial corruption. Hassan said that he believed Khamenei truly wished to cut back on high-level corruption and for that reason chose Qalibaf, who, with his IRGC background, would be relatively safe from retaliation by IRGC elements. He claimed that Qalibaf's track record in this regard has demonstrated that he has sufficient political courage to at least attempt to tackle this problem.

¶14. (C) Hassan also said that Qalibaf has a very warm and personable style and appearance, much like Khatami, as opposed to many of the other 'scowling and bearded' candidates whose appearance can be somewhat off-putting for many young Iranians. Hassan pointed to a March 27 appearance of Qalibaf on Iran's

'Hot Seat' interview program ('Sandali-ye Daq'), where Qalibaf recounted the time when he was travelling in civilian clothes and was needlessly detained and hassled by LEF members on a family trip to Mashhad (until he finally revealed who he was), as an example of his ability to reach out and connect to Iranians.

¶115. (C) Hassan said another factor working in Qalibaf's favor is that he has a solid record as a pilot in the Iran-Iraq war, having successfully flown a high number of sorties over Iraq. Qalibaf also heads the Iranian Pas football team, which won the Iranian league last year and is doing well this year this year in the Asia Cup. Given that Iran is likely to have made the World Cup before election day, Iran's football euphoria might also benefit Qalibaf.

¶116. (C) Hassan pointed out that Supreme Leader Khamenei himself might ultimately support a Qalibaf candidacy, seeing Qalibaf as young, a good manager, someone who can rein in corruption, and someone who would serve as more of a Prime Minister than a President. Qalibaf's IRGC background would also make him more attractive to Khamenei.

¶117. (C) Another factor in favor of Qalibaf is that he might well be supported by the "Mashhad Circle" ('Dayereh-ye Mashhad'), i.e., a network of prominent and affluent Mashhad-born businessmen and industrialists. This group, despite Khamenei's Khorasani background (which is relatively recent), feels under-represented in the highest circles of power and might well back a Qalibaf candidacy, as did the Yazd group did for Khatami during his campaigns (although the Khorasan 'kingmaker' Ayatollah Vaez Tabasi himself, head of the Astan-e Qods Razavi Foundation, is supporting Rafsanjani).

¶118. (C) Finally, Hassan said that contrary to what many believe in the West, there is no ambient sense of crisis among the young in Iran. He claimed there is an emerging feeling of self-confidence, bolstered by the economy relative strength. He cited the relative ease that one can get a car loan these days with only 20 percent down as an example of factors that are lightening the public mood. He also said that US pressure on Iran and scenarios of a US-led strike against Iran are not taken seriously by many young Iranians. He claims that desires for greater democracy are not a priority, but rather that the young are looking to be left alone to "have a good time." The youth leader with whom Poloff spoke reinforced this point, saying that Iranian youth today, unlike when Khatami was first elected, are more 'pleasure-seeking' ('lezzat-gara'), and are unfazed by even unemployment as long as their parents, often working two to three jobs, are able to provide them with pocket money. Hassan added that he sensed that what people were looking for from the system currently was primarily 'greater efficiency,' which could play to Qalibaf's strength.

¶119. (C) Hassan also pointed out that Qalibaf, who only recently has declared his desire to compete, is already polling better numbers than the other conservative candidates. In a just concluded 'Baztab' website poll, he finished third overall with 13.8 percent, behind Rafsanjani (21.6 percent) and Moin (16.6 percent - but there is a real chance that the Guardian Council will bar Moin from running). Qalibaf's numbers increased three percentage points over the first Baztab poll in mid-March, and Hassan told Poloff that conservative polling organizations are consistently showing Qalibaf as the main vote-getter among conservatives. Hassan suggested that if Qalibaf's numbers continue to improve while CCFIR favorite Larijani's stay in the high single-digit, even Larijani himself might choose to drop out of contention to save himself embarrassment.

¶120. (C) Despite the above, Qalibaf does have many negatives Hassan conceded, primarily the fact of his military background. Hassan and many other Iranians have told Poloff that as a rule Iranians don't like the military when it comes to selecting civilian leaders. Indeed, Qalibaf's opponents have already started their campaign against him by stating that as a military man, he cannot be President, since Article 115 of the Constitution states that "the President must be elected from among religious and political personalities." A Guardian

Council spokesman has said that this matter is for the Majlis to decide, which is unlikely before June, and it seems unlikely that Qalibaf would be barred from running on this account.

¶21. (C) Nonetheless, Hassan concluded his reasoning by pointing out that the Iranian voter quite often votes on the basis of emotion, and that if a Qalibaf candidacy were to 'catch fire' as did Khatami's (albeit for different reasons) in 1997, then he could well wind up winning. Indeed, Hassan said that one reason that Rafsanjani was delaying committing was to wait to see how serious Qalibaf was about his quest, and he said that ultimately Rafsanjani would choose not to run, being unsure of a first-round victory (election laws says that there is a run-off between the top two candidates if no single candidate gets a majority of the vote).

¶22. (C) COMMENT: Qalibaf himself recently told press that "my only serious opponent in the elections is Hashemi Rafsanjani," and indeed indications are that Qalibaf might be potentially be Rafsanjani's strongest competition. Hassan's theory puts Qalibaf in the interesting position of possibly becoming a 'protest candidate' with Establishment backing. None of the other conservative candidates show any sign of increasing their popularity beyond single-digits, and as the 1997 Khatami victory (or, more accurately the Nateq-Nuri loss) showed, the conservative clerically-dominated 'Establishment' can only do so much for its candidate if another candidate catches the public's eye.

DAVIS